

T.A. Thomas
ENGL 618
Dr. Gastle
Dec. 6, 2015

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Editing Project: Josephina Niggli

Document type: Letter

Image files: HL_MSS8O-09-01-05_01 through HL_MSS8O-09-01-05_10

I had the honor of transcribing a letter from Josephina Niggli written on a Sunday while she is attending Graduate School at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The letter is a recap of her week in classes and is addressed to her family. The tone is conversational and warm, with Niggli inserting humor or anecdotes along with a few short dialogue rich 'scenes' that must have helped her loved ones more easily imagine her life in North Carolina. Niggli briefly discusses her classes and in some cases mentions the type of work she is doing and the subject matter she is studying. Born in July of 1910, birth name Josephine, Niggli was 24 years old at the time. She'd previously studied in San Antonio, Texas and received her undergraduate degree from Incarnate Word College there.

She was born in Monterrey, the capital and largest city of the northeastern Mexican state of Nuevo León. Her parents were United States expatriates of Euro-American descent. Her father was from Texas, her mother from Virginia. During the course of her lifetime, Niggli would make a name for herself as a dramatist, poet, folklorist, and novelist, often serving to bridge the cultural gap between Mexico and the United States. Her progressive views on gender, race and ethnicity helped lay the ground work for writers such as Ana Castillo. After a brief stint in Hollywood, working anonymously on films like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, Niggli came to Western Carolina University to teach Drama and English and helped found the Theatre Department. The letter I worked on is part of Western Carolina's

collection and the University has named one of its theatres after her. Niggli would live in Cullowhee from 1956 to the time of her death in 1983.

In approaching the transcribing and editing process, my goal was to remain as true and close to the source document as possible. I found her handwriting fairly easy to digest and the initial draft of the transcription came relatively quickly. One of the most interesting aspects of her writing is the fact that her spellings for words sometimes slips between English and Spanish. These represented a challenge in many ways, my rudimentary knowledge of Spanish helped. In those instances, I chose to leave the spelling, incorrect or not in terms of what is considered proper English or grammatically correct, as is. In some cases, my notes do address corrections, such as with Sam Selden and Somerset Maugham, but I felt the integrity of the transcribed document demanded that the words and spellings of them remain true to the context of the letter itself. For instance, with the mention of Sam Selden specifically, Niggli writes “Seldon” versus Selden. I chose to leave the misspelling intact. Though she would go on to work with him for a few years as part of the Carolina Playmakers after receiving her graduate degree, she had only been in Chapel Hill for a short while when she wrote this letter. Without knowing the reasoning behind the choice to use the letter o instead of the e, I left it pristine. The accompanying note explains this choice. The temptation was to ‘fix’ it, but again, I felt the document deserved to remain as she’d written it.

To assist in readability, I have presented the transcribed document in two forms. The initial read, if you will, is the full body and text of the letter, without breaks or pagination allowing the reader to gain a feeling for Josephina’s writing style, her frame of mind, and her sense of humor. The second version of the letter more closely resembles the content of each page of the letter. This version should allow closer examination of the source document and the transcription.

In each case I have included footnotes to provide information and historical context for several of the details Niggli mentions within the letter, however, I have chosen to maintain a separate page within this file so as not to inhibit enjoyment of the letter's natural flow, or compete with the image files that accompany the single page transcriptions that represent version two. I understand that in most academic writing it is preferable to include the notes on the same page of the document to which they apply, however, my feeling is that this is not a research paper, nor is it a journal article examining the letter as part of a discussion. I felt the integrity of the artifact took precedence. In any case, simply printing the notes and annotations so that they can be viewed while examining the letter is a viable option.

My hope is that those who do take the time to view my work enjoy getting to know a bit more about this trailblazing woman as much as I have enjoyed this opportunity.

Dear Family –

Today is Sunday (there is something on the point of this pen, and I can't get it off. Sam Seldon¹ used it to autograph his book² for me – the text we use in drama – this is the result) and if there is a deader day of the week I've not yet found it.

I spent all afternoon in the library trying to read a tragedy, and I'm not finished with it yet, but that is better than the ghastly assignment in the Romantic³ poets. I like Shelley⁴ & Coleridge⁵, and in my time I have even liked Wordsworth⁶ (heaven save the mark!) but I draw the line at these minor poets who talk on for the sake of rhyming five words in such a clever fashion.

I have a good joke to tell you from yesterday. Harry Davis⁷ said "Miss Niggli, you gave us such an interesting definition of art yesterday – (slight pause) without even reading Mr. Seldon's chapter, but now that you have read it, what do you think of his notes concerning actors?"

Now this wouldn't have been difficult had I read the notes, but I hadn't, so I took a deep breath & said, "Well, I consider them infinitely more valuable to the amateur than Mr. Boleslavsky's⁸." This brought us an hour of the Russian school⁹ so I think I did pretty well. He's aching to trap me, but so far I've side-stepped all traps. He wants to pantomime for Monday, and – you've guessed it, I'm going to do the Horse.

Something funny happened in Elizabethan¹⁰ drama yesterday morning. Remember, it's a graduate class of English majors. The proff¹¹ was speaking about types of drama, & mentioned the Patient Griselda¹² story. Suddenly he asked what it was, but there was no answer. I certainly wasn't going to blaze forth from the back of the room, and I was interested to see what would happen. He began going down the line, & those men & women, some of them in their 40's, turned red & wiggled, but could give neither chief author nor story. His face ceased being grim & got startled looking, and finally, when he got to me, he looked like he would burst when I answered. He just sighed and sat back, & then you should have heard the lecture. He ranted that a girl from a foreign country should know more about English literature when they didn't. I've ceased trying to explain to people ~~about~~ that just because I come from Mexico I'm not Mexican, & I held my tongue as to the fact that Patient Griselda is German by way of Italy, but he did himself proud.

After the Romantic poetry class Mr. Bishop¹³ called me up to the desk, & I shook in my boots because he is very pedantic & exactly the opposite to Dr. Roehl¹⁴ in every respect.

"er- Miss Niggli," he said, "I have been advised by the dean that you are from Mexico."

"Yes, sir," said I, staring.

"You speak very good English" – this with a benevolent smile.

"Why, thank you," said I, grinning back.

He coughed, & pyramided his fingers. "I was wondering if you found difficulty with English spelling. It's – ah – so unlike Spanish."

"Yes, sir!" said I feeling.

He nodded & played about with the things on his desk. "Well, as a general rule I don't – but in your case we might – I mean, you needn't worry about the spelling."

"Thank you, sir," said I, and went out with my head whirling. The entire graduate school is making especial effort to be nice to me, and I can't figure out why. Even Mr. Seldon tracked me down to see how I was getting along, and everybody seems to know who I am.

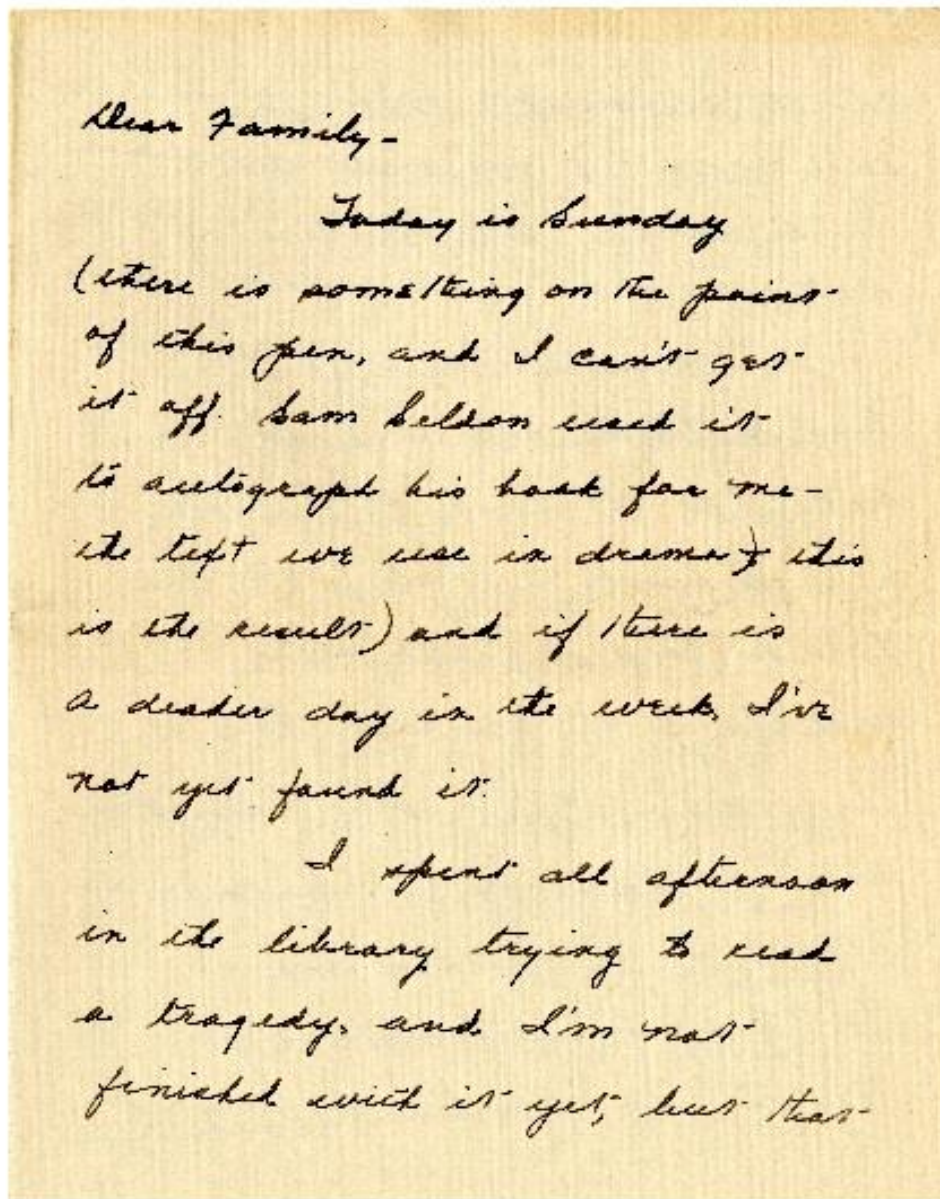
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I washed and ironed this morning, washed my hair, (by the way, the mail is not taken up here on Sunday) stayed at the library from 2-5, and now I have to read some plays. I like that proff, but if I make a B in Bishop's class I'll be thrilled to death.

Much love,

Josephine.

June 17, 1935¹⁶



Dear Family -

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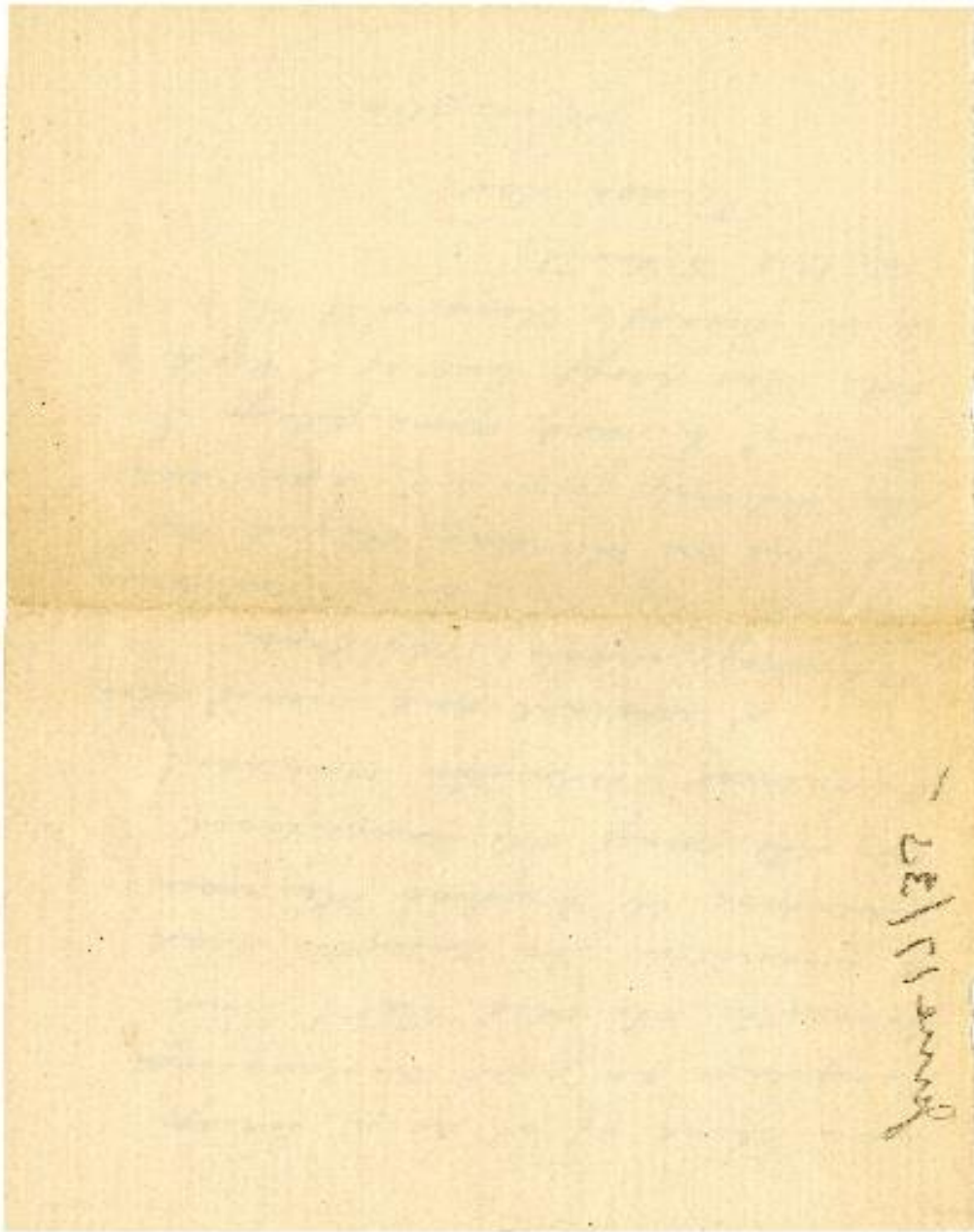
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Page Ten:



One horizontal fold and the date June 17, 1935¹⁶ in pencil.

Notes

1. Sam Seldon (Selden) – (1918-1977) Member of the UNC Chapel Hill faculty and chairman of the Department of Dramatic Art from 1944-1959. He was also the director of the Carolina Playmakers, with whom Niggli would spend several years after earning her graduate degree.
2. His (Seldon's) book – Either *Stage Scenery and Lighting: A Handbook for Non-Professionals* (1930) or, most probably, *A Player's Handbook; the theory and practice of acting* (1934). Additionally, his 1949 collection of *International Folk Plays* includes Niggli's *The Red Velvet Goat*, a play she would publish in 1937.
3. Romantics - as defined by Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch: "A movement in art and literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in revolt against the Neoclassicism of the previous centuries...The German poet Friedrich Schlegel, who is given credit for first using the term *romantic* to describe literature, defined it as "literature depicting emotional matter in an imaginative form." This is as accurate a general definition as can be accomplished, although Victor Hugo's phrase "liberalism in literature" is also apt. Imagination, emotion, and freedom are certainly the focal points of romanticism. Any list of particular characteristics of the literature of romanticism includes subjectivity and an emphasis on individualism; spontaneity; freedom from rules; solitary life rather than life in society; the beliefs that imagination is superior to reason and devotion to beauty; love of and worship of nature; and fascination with the past, especially the myths and mysticism of the middle ages. Best known English poets: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats Examples of American poets: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman
4. Shelley – Percy Bysshe Shelley, poet (1792-1822)

5. Coleridge – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, poet, philosopher, critic (1772-1834)
6. Wordsworth – William Wordsworth, poet (1770-1850)
7. Harry Davis must have been a classmate. I presume as much simply because Niggli does not use Mr. or Dr. as a formal form of address as she does with the other men mentioned in the letter.

Unable to locate.
8. Mr. Boleslavsky – Russian director involved with the Moscow Art Theatre who gave a series of lectures in 1923 following a performance of *Tsar Fyodor* in New York. As a result, he was invited to work in American and is responsible for spreading the Stanislavsky's method of acting in the United States. He opened the American Laboratory Theatre to provide a studio atmosphere in which playwrights and actors could risk failure as they learned. He would go on to direct on Broadway and in Hollywood and publish, first in 1933, an incomplete acting system based on Constantin Stanislavski's ideas called *Acting, the First Six Lessons*. It is possible that Niggli was given this as assigned reading or took it upon herself to read it based on her seeming familiarity with his work.
9. Russian School – The Stanovitch-Mamoulian-Boleslavsky School used the earliest teachings and methods of Constantin Stanislavski that required actors to utilize sense memory and focus internally to portray character. This 'method,' later brought to public prominence as The Method by actors like Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, and . Famous American teachers of the method were Lee Strasberg, Uta Hagen, and Stella Adler. The Russian School influenced American playwrights like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, as well. Incidentally, films directed by both Mamoulian and Boleslavsky were blacklisted by the Legion of Decency, a Catholic organization.
10. Elizabethan Drama - Also known as early modern English Theatre, 1562-1642, Elizabethan style productions include the works of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Johnson.

11. Professor.
12. Patient Griselda – Character based on the peasant wife in “The Clerk’s Tale” by Chaucer who agrees to marry a Marquis with the condition that she obey him always, even if it causes her pain.
13. Mr. Bishop – One of Josephina Niggli’s literature professors.
14. Dr. Roehl – Former professor who taught Niggli during her undergraduate career at Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas.
15. W. Somerset Maugham – (1874-1965) French playwright, novelist and short story writer best known for *Of Human Bondage*, *The Painted Veil* and *The Razor’s Edge*. Reputedly, he was the highest paid author during the 1930’s. The film version of his novel *The Painted Veil* joins the two films by Mamoulian and Boleslavsky in that it too was condemned by the Legion of Decency.
16. June 17, 1935 was a Monday. Perhaps this is the date the letter was mailed as she wrote the letter on a Sunday.

Annotated Bibliography

Alchin, Linda. "Elizabethan Theatre." *ELIZABETHAN THEATRE*. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.

This website contains general knowledge of the Elizabethan Era and is maintained by Linda Alchin. Alchin possesses an undergraduate degree in history and owns Siteseen Ltd., a company that focuses on online content for educational purposes. Alchin has served as an advisor on several films, including one directed by Ridley Scott. Her definition of Elizabethan Theatre suited the purposes of this assignment.

Beer, John. "Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1772–1834)." John Beer *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: OUP, 2004. Online ed. Ed. Lawrence Goldman.

Oct. 2008. 22 Nov. 2015 <<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wncln.wncln.org/view/article/5888>>.

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography is an online resource that contains the national record of men and women who have shaped British history and culture and across the world. Referencing individuals from the ancient Romans up to the 21st century. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography offers concise, up-to-date biographies written by expert authors. The database is overseen by academic editors at Oxford University in the UK, and published by the Oxford University Press. The database serves as a quick and reliable means of locating information on historical literary figures like Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley.

Boleslavsky, Richard. *Acting: The First Six Lessons*. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1949. Print.

Boleslavsky was a Russian theatre director who came to prominence in the United States in the 1930's through a series of lectures that introduced a 'method' of acting based on techniques created by

Constanin Stanislavski. The Stanovitch-Mamouliau-Boleslavsky School was also referred to as the 'Russian School' and this book documents the first six acting lessons they taught at their studio.

Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Nevill Coghill. "The Clerk's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Summoner concludes his tale and the host turns to the Clerk and asks him to relay a lively tale. The story concerns a king named Walter who agrees to take a wife so that his household may have an heir. Walter's one condition for their marriage is that his new wife Griselda must promise to always obey his will. He tests her over the course of several years, ultimately decides that he could not have found a more patient or deserving woman. This resource was used to verify the identity of Patient Griselda.

Gill, Stephen. "Wordsworth, William (1770–1850)." Stephen Gill *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: OUP, 2004. Online ed. Ed. Lawrence Goldman. May 2010. 22 Nov. 2015. Web.

See entry for Coleridge above.

Thomas, Larque. "Elizabethan Theatre - A Lecture - by Thomas Larque (2001)." *Elizabethan Theatre - A Lecture - by Thomas Larque (2001)*. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.

Morner, Kathleen and Ralph Rausch. *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1997.

O'Neill, Michael. "Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1792–1822)." Michael O'Neill *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: OUP, 2004. Online ed. Ed. Lawrence Goldman. Jan. 2009. 22 Nov. 2015. Web.

See entry for Coleridge above.

Selden, Samuel. *International Folk Plays*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949. Print.

This title was discovered when searching for the book written by Samuel Selden that the author signed for Niggli, and as a result ruined the tip of her pen. She complains about the condition of the pen and this circumstance in the letter to her family. Due to the date of publication this book is not the book being referenced in the letter.

This publication is a collection of nine plays written by the students and former students of UNC Chapel Hill.'s drama department. Chosen for their diversity, the plays contained within represent many countries and races. Though these works are considered "folk plays," Selden does not suggest that their scope is limited. The plays cover subject matter from realism to fantasy. The playwright's backgrounds are both rural and urban. Tone ranges from humor to pathos, with emphasis on the whole man.

Selden, Samuel, and Loretto C. Bailey. *A Players' Handbook: The Theory and Practice of Acting*. New York: F.S. Crofts & Co, 1934. Print.

This title was discovered when searching for the book written by Samuel Selden that the author signed for Niggli, and as a result ruined the tip of her pen. She complains about the condition of the pen and this circumstance in the letter to her family. Because of the date of publication this book and subject matter is a strong candidate for the book mentioned in the letter by Niggli as the course she is discussing seems to center upon stagecraft. This book discusses the theory and practice of acting and would have been suitable as a reference for the graduate classroom.

Selden, Samuel, and Hunton D. Sellman. *Stage Scenery and Lighting: A Handbook for Non-Professionals*. New York: F.S. Crofts & Co, 1930. Print.

This title was also discovered when searching for the book written by Samuel Selden that the author signed for Niggli, and as a result ruined the tip of her pen. She complains about the condition of

the pen and this circumstance in the letter to her family. Though this text was published prior to the date of the letter, the course work and class discussions Niggli relates to her family have little to do with scenery and lighting. Meant to be a handbook for amateur and community theatre companies, the book offers practical information on the technologies of the time that were used to design, build and implement scenery and lighting schemas for the stage.